# Italian Comics in the New Millennium

**VOLUME II** 

New Scenarios, New Forms, New Themes

Edited by **Alessio Aletta** *University of Toronto* 

Series in Art



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#### www.vernonpress.com

In the Americas: In the rest of the world:

Vernon Press Vernon Press

1000 N West Street, Suite 1200, C/Sancti Espiritu 17, Wilmington, Delaware 19801 Malaga, 29006

United States Spain

Series in Art

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025941819

ISBN: 979-8-8819-0325-1

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# **Introduction.** A Blank Page

#### Alessio Aletta

University of Toronto

We know just what our beautiful false intelligence affirms: "We are only the sum and the prolongation of our ancestors," it says. Perhaps! All right! What does it matter? But we will not listen! Take care not to repeat those infamous words! Instead, lift up your head!

Marinetti (1909)

Mom, you told me once...

"The body is the temple of the soul."

But my soul is an iconoclast.

It'd burn everything to the to the ground.

Fumettibrutti (2019)

In 2020, Lucca Comics and Games, the largest convention of comics in Europe (and one of the largest worldwide), was temporarily renamed "Lucca *Changes*." This name aimed to emphasize the necessary adaptations required to organize an event of such magnitude while adhering to pandemic restrictions. However, it also held a broader significance, as showcased in the event's poster. Traditionally, Lucca Comics commissions a renowned Italian cartoonist to design their poster. However, for this occasion, the chosen designer, Roberto Recchioni, left it completely blank, except for the motto "Dream on." Ten artists, designed as "dreamers," were then assigned to create semi-official versions of the poster, but the original void was, above all, an invite for everyone to imagine their future for Italian *fumetto*. This concept is not entirely new; for instance, Recchioni

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Fumetto (literally 'little smoke,' originally referred to the speech ballooms) is the Italian term for 'comics.' In this volume, "comics" refers broadly to the medium, while "fumetti" specifically refers to Italian comics.

In recent years, the term "graphic novel" (or *romanzo grafico*), originated in America, has gained popularity also in Italy. It refers to standalone comics, especially to emphasize more pronounced artistic aims. While the exact definition of the term is debatable, several

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had already employed a similar strategy to promote a particularly long-awaited issue (#362, November 2016) of the series *Dylan Dog*, which he curated at the time (Barberis 2020). Nevertheless, Italy's most famous and largest comics festival decided to begin with a literal blank canvas, poignantly acknowledging (and perhaps encouraging) a disruption in the Italian comics landscape.

Indeed, although the tension between tradition and innovation remains one of the most prominent features in Italian comics of the new millennium, another strong tendency emerges among the younger generation of comic artists: the drive to create something completely new. It is not a coincidence that Maicol & Mirco (Michael Rocchetti), one of the leading figures in Italian comics, recently published a collection of Marinetti's futurist manifestos, presented in comic form (2020). These manifestos, written at the beginning of the twentieth century, expressed the Futurist artists' explicit intention to disregard and even obliterate the past in order to pave the way for art that is truly original. While millennial (and now even generation Z) comics artists usually do not quite arrive at such extremes, they certainly tend to embody some of these disruptive tendencies, creating works which, in many ways, could not be conceived a few decades ago in terms of production and fruition.

While Zerocalcare may be considered the most popular forerunner of this trend, Fumettibrutti, alias Josephine Signorelli (born in Catania in 1991), is perhaps even more representative. Fumettibrutti gained recognition in the late 2010s by sharing short comic strips on her Instagram profile. She subsequently published three graphic memoirs, collectively known as "Trilogia esplicita" ('Explicit Trilogy'; 2018-2020), in which she came out as a transgender woman. Her comics tackle subjects such as sexuality, discrimination, and the harsh realities of economic struggles with brutal honesty and a realistic approach, juxtaposed with highly stylized artwork (Mandolini 2022). While she borrows some aesthetic elements from the underground scene, her style is unique, even primal (in an interview, she compared her comics to an infant's "wail"; Mandolini 2021). Fumettibrutti's name itself, which translates to 'Ugly comics,' cheekily asserts her rebellious stance. The experience of Fumettibrutti is indicative of several phenomena that have emerged in the realm of comics, in Italy but also globally, over the past two decades.

To measure how far Italian comics have come, let us briefly consider their century-long history (necessarily abridged to the point of oversimplification, I am afraid). From its early twentieth-century origins, Italian comics developed

contributors to this volume have chosen to use it to distinguish specific comic books with these characteristics from the more general terms such as "comics" and "fumetti."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> For a somewhat more detailed – but still cursory – treatment of the subject, see the introduction to the first volume of this collection; for more exhaustive discussions of the

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largely as a form of popular entertainment, particularly influenced by American strips, initially "betrayed" in form and spirit by mutilating the balloons and adapting it to a conservative bourgeois mentality (Bindi and Raffaelli 2021, 35-39). Throughout the mid-century, however, Italian fumetto truly exploded: adventure and, later, crime comics became dominant, shaping the industry's commercial and narrative structures. By the 1960s, the perception of comics began to shift. The rise of more experimental works contributed to an increasing distinction between mass-market comics and those seeking literary and artistic recognition. During the late 1960s and 1970s, parallel to the enduring success of mainstream comics series, Italy saw the rise of avant-garde, satirical, and underground comics, often addressing social issues, countercultural movements, and experimental storytelling. This period also saw the diversification of readership, with comics expanding beyond children and adolescents to engage adult audiences. By the 1980s, however, the lines between mainstream and auteur comics had become increasingly blurred. Italian comics embraced a broader range of genres, including horror, science fiction, and political satire, while international influences contributed to new stylistic and narrative approaches. The decade also saw a shift toward more complex storytelling, with long-running series incorporating deeper psychological and philosophical themes. The 1990s continued this trajectory, with greater experimentation in both serialized and independent comics. The growing acceptance of comics as a legitimate literary form paved the way for the rise of self-contained long-form comics.

By the turn of the millennium, Italian comics had evolved into a diverse and dynamic medium, balancing tradition with innovation, setting the stage for the profound transformations that followed. And those transformations have been profound indeed; in many respects, the contemporary landscape of Italian comics is undergoing a radical redefinition as concerns its thematic scope, modes of production, and forms of dissemination. While historical continuity remains a crucial element in understanding these developments (as we have demonstrated in the first volume of this collection), the scale and intensity of change in recent decades mark an unprecedented departure from past paradigms.

The proliferation of self-publishing and independent comics has played a central role in the evolution of comics production (as Lisa Maya Quaianni Manuzzato explores in her chapter). Digital tools, online printing, and comics schools have facilitated the rise of a thriving DIY comics scene, enabling new authors and collectives to emerge and fostering a sense of community through festivals and independent distribution networks. The Italian underground

history of Italian comics, see the volumes by Brancato (2008), Bindi and Raffaelli (2021), and, particularly for the evolution of comics criticism in Italy, Lorenzo Di Paola (2019).

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comics scene has experienced a resurgence, driven by a renewed emphasis on independent and experimental production. This revival is not merely a continuation of past underground movements but a response to contemporary technological and cultural shifts. The proliferation of small presses, self-publishing initiatives, and artist-driven collectives demonstrates a resistance to commercial constraints and an embrace of alternative distribution models. The expansion of comics festivals across Italy has further contributed to this dynamic, providing platforms for new voices, fostering creative exchanges, and challenging hierarchical distinctions between mainstream and independent production. These festivals are not simply sites of cultural celebration; they function as critical spaces where the evolving identity of Italian comics is continuously negotiated and reimagined.

Inextricably linked to the discourse on comic production (and not only that) is what is arguably the most noticeable innovation in the comics industry of the past decades: the advent of digital comics. This veritable Copernican revolution in the mediascape has introduced perhaps the biggest transformative force into the field. As Giorgio Busi Rizzi and Lorenzo Di Paola argue, Italian comics have adapted to the new media ecosystem by embracing digital experimentation, though some initiatives have struggled to find their audience. The increasing prevalence of webcomics, mobile-friendly formats, and digital-first publishing strategies has altered the way comics are produced, consumed, and circulated. These developments have democratized access to the medium, enabling creators to bypass traditional gatekeepers and engage directly with audiences on a global scale. At the same time, they have fostered new aesthetic and narrative experiments, as digital platforms encourage interactive storytelling, non-linear structures, and hybrid visual forms. The incorporation of digital tools into the creative process has also led to new ways of thinking about comics as a medium, further pushing the boundaries of what constitutes a comic in the twenty-first century. Beyond digital storytelling, the very structure of the comics industry is evolving in response to digitalization. In their chapter, Yesim Tonga and the LYNX Unit researchers of IMT Lucca examine the impact of digital transformations on the working conditions of comics creators. Their study highlights the rise of self-publishing, subscription-based models, and the increasing precarity of artistic labor, offering a nuanced perspective on the challenges and opportunities of comics production in the digital age.

As the medium changes, new forms and themes emerge, or, perhaps, acorns that were almost unnoticeable in the old millennium grow into mighty oaks, to use French historian Marc Bloch's famous metaphor. Still, one should always remember that Bloch also adds: "But only if they meet favorable conditions which are entirely beyond the scope of embryology" (1953, 62). In a sense, our collection aims precisely at examining how the conditions of the Italian context

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have influenced the growth of the massive oak that is the Italian comics mediascape.

Well, within this evolving framework, the emergence of reality-based comics – "fumetto di realtà" – represents one of the most striking departures from past conventions. While documentary comics have long existed, their recent proliferation and integration into mainstream publishing indicate a decisive shift in the function of the medium (this transition is reconstructed here by Dario Boemia). Comics are now frequently employed as tools for investigative journalism, social critique, and personal testimony, offering perspectives on pressing contemporary issues such as political conflict, systemic inequalities, and migration (this last theme is discussed in depth here by Silvia Vari's contribution). This transformation extends beyond content; it redefines the role of comics as a vehicle for knowledge production, civic engagement, and historical documentation. The medium, once predominantly associated with entertainment, now occupies an increasingly prominent position in the landscape of cultural and political discourse.

This shift is further reflected in the ascendancy of the so-called graphic novel, which has disrupted traditional modes of production and reception. The shift towards self-contained narratives published in bookstore-friendly formats also challenges conventional distinctions between comics and literature, reinforcing the legitimacy of the medium within broader cultural and academic discourses. While serialized comics remain a fundamental part of the Italian comics industry, the rise of long-form narratives, often categorized under this contested term, signals a move towards more expansive and introspective storytelling; even in spatial terms, Italian comics have increasingly engaged with regional and local identities, with a growing number of works exploring narratives set in the Italian provinces (as explored by Rodolfo Dal Canto). Contemporary comics artists also engage with themes of personal and collective identity and historical memory, and contemporary social issues, suggesting an evolution of comics into a medium capable of sustaining complex and layered narratives. The engagement with such themes has led to the emergence of new trends, such as diverse and subversive representations of gender and sexuality (as demonstrated here by Alice Parrinello in her essay on a "queer trend in Italian graphic novels") and the intersection of fact and fiction in Italian graphic memoirs (Claudia Cerulo explores in particular the representation of maternal lineage).

Taken together, these various phenomena underscore the revolutionary transformation that is reshaping Italian comics today. While historical continuities remain evident, the contemporary moment is defined by an unprecedented degree of fluidity, experimentation, and conceptual expansion (enabling the creation of highly disruptive yet widely popular narratives in comics, such as

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the Instagram-based *Isa vince tutto*, analyzed in a close reading by Lorenzo Bonoldi). Italian comics are no longer bound by inherited traditions or constrained by familiar formats; rather, they are at the forefront of a broader reevaluation of what the medium can achieve. This volume seeks to explore these shifting paradigms, offering a critical examination of the new themes, new forms, and new scenarios that are redefining the field in the new millennium.

The chapters are divided into two sections. The first one, titled "In Person or Online? Present (and Future) of the Italian Comics Industry," explores the evolving landscape of Italian comics production, distribution and consumption, from the rise of self-publishing and digital comics to the impact of new distribution platforms and work dynamics.

Starting with the production aspect, the first chapter, by Lisa Maya Quaianni Manuzzato, discusses the thriving self-publishing comics scene in contemporary Italy, especially since the 2010s. Access to digital tools, online printing, and comics schools has facilitated production and led to the emergence of notable authors and collectives. DIY comics have become important in comic festivals, fostering communities among readers, authors, and industry professionals. The paper analyzes the characteristics of contemporary DIY Italian comics, including artistic diversity, narrative and publishing formats, distribution channels, and the impact of events and festivals.

Giorgio Busi Rizzi and Lorenzo Di Paola examine the evolution of Italian digital comics, employing a medium-archaeological approach to trace the historical evolution of Italian comics and the strip format, and reconstructing the different phases of Italian digital comics. With the advent of digital media and the rise of globalized production and distribution strategies, Italian comics have undergone changes to adapt to the new media ecosystem. Even in this area, comics production in Italy proves to be substantial and extremely variegated, although some of its experiments have not been successful, perhaps because they did not find their target audience. The chapter concludes by analyzing the influence of digital innovations on the formal structure, consumption, and interaction patterns of Italian comics.

Bringing these two aspects together, the chapter by Yesim Tonga and the LYNX research unit at the IMT School for Advanced Studies of Lucca examines the impacts of digital transformation on the Italian comics field, considering the changing work dynamics of comics creators. The essay explores self-publishing, digital comics and webtoons, and the introduction of subscription-based platforms. By integrating theoretical and sectoral perspectives, the authors analyze the work challenges faced by comics creators in Italy and consider the country-specific characteristics of the comics field, contributing to a broader understanding of the domain and cultural transformation within the Italian comics industry.

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The second section, "Stories and History," explores how Italian comics engage with social, political, and historical themes through diverse narrative forms, both non-fiction and fiction (or blending the two), with chapters discerning general trends or focusing on specific case studies.

Dario Boemia provides an overview of the evolution of comics journalism, highlighting three distinct stages in the relationship between journalism and the medium of comics (coexistence, merging, and emancipation). The implications of this shift are examined, including changes in genres, style, themes, and the concept of journalism itself. After an extensive premise on the origins of comics journalism, the analysis focuses on a span of two decades, from the publication of *Palestine* by Joe Sacco to the emergence of *Revue Dessinée Italia* and Zerocalcare's work in newspapers and the news industry.

Silvia Vari's contribution analyzes a specific theme in non-fiction comics (fumetto di realtà): the emergence of graphic novels and comics addressing immigration to Italy from the Mediterranean basin. With undocumented immigration becoming a prominent socio-political issue since the 1990s, the chapter traces the genealogy and dissemination of Italian graphic narratives on immigration, exploring the narrative genres used to depict experiences of forced migration and migrant imaginaries, with an extensive comparison to the depiction of immigration in other Italian media.

Rodolfo Dal Canto examines the emergence of a new wave of Italian comics that focus on narratives set in the Italian province, focusing on a corpus of five texts: *Luna del mattino* by Francesco Cattani (2017), *Bambino paura* by Juta (2021), *Malibu* by Eliana Albertini (2019), *Un corpo smembrato* by Luigi Filippelli and Samuele Canestrari (2021), and *Padovaland* by Miguel Vila (2020). Created by the latest generation of artists, these self-contained comic books depict fictional stories with clear references to specific Italian territorial realities. The analysis explores the narrative and stylistic choices employed in representing the province and identifies the defining characteristics of this trend in contemporary Italian comics.

Alice Parrinello explores the queer trend in Italian graphic novels in the socio-political context of the failed anti-discrimination Ddl Zan bill in 2021. Using a theoretical framework built around the notions of homonormativity, local analyses, and graphic novels theory, the author analyzes five LGBTQIA+ Italian comic artists (Nicoz Balboa, Frad, Giulio Macaione, and Flavia Biondi). She argues for the presence of a significant queer representation in the Italian graphic novels scene, highlighting how these comics challenge heteronormative and homonormative portrayals by disrupting stereotypes, and featuring diverse characters.

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Claudia Cerulo investigates the intersection between fact and fiction in Italian graphic memoirs that delve into the reconstruction of maternal lineage, focusing on three texts: Sansone and Tota's *Palacinche* (2012), Garagnani's *Mor. Storia per le mie madri* (2022), and Vialli's *Dove sei* (2023). Drawing on Lynda Barry's concept of "autofictionalbiography" and existing research on the relationship between graphic memoirs and auto/biofiction, by examining textual, paratextual, and contextual elements, the paper aims to identify and compare the authors' multimodal narrative strategies in creating the "special reality" of graphic memoirs. This investigation sheds light on the boundaries between documentary research and fiction, self-representation, and genealogical exploration in the context of these graphic memoirs.

Finally, Lorenzo Bonoldi gives us an extensive analysis of a peculiar example of digital comics: *Isa vince tutto*. This comic, originally published on Instagram, is centered around the historical character of Isabella d'Este, reimagined as a millennial teenager. This comic strip was created as part of a government-funded initiative to promote museums and other monuments via comics (in this case, the Ducal Palace of Mantua). Bonoldi's analysis delves into the creative process behind *Isa*, giving us precious insights both on the production of webcomics, their cultural impact and the challenge of adapting historical sources for a new target audience and in new media and platforms.

In these chapters, we encounter a variety of viewpoints on the state of Italian comics - some converging, others revealing striking contradictions. This inevitably brings us back to the central question that began the first volume of this collection: How are Italian comics doing lately? After considering all the insightful contributions collected here, we are forced to admit that there is no singular answer (though this hardly comes as a surprise); rather, the landscape is composed of numerous intersecting components, each contributing to the broader picture. This picture, though fragmented, is undeniably compelling: a dynamic scene characterized by the rise of self-publishing, the proliferation of digital comics, the infusion of fresh talent into established publishing houses, and the emergence of new publishers embracing innovation. Alongside these developments, we observe cross-border influences, transnational exchanges, the growth of "graphic novels," and an expansion of themes and forms, all contributing to an ever-evolving medium. As the nature of contemporary comics is fluid and ever-shifting, the situation is in constant flux, and much remains to be said. For this reason, I cannot end without quoting the title of one of the most innovative digital comics published in Italy (Ghetti and Trimarchi, 2014-17): To Be Continued...

As I call for a "continuation" of the research lines presented here, I would like to acknowledge once again the support of colleagues from TICS (Toronto Italian Comics Studies) and SnIF (Studying 'n' Investigating Fumetti), whose

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contributions were vital to this project. My heartfelt thanks also go to Vernon Press for their belief in this endeavor, to the "seasoned reader" Professor Luca Somigli, and to Nunzia for her invaluable help during the editing process and her unwavering support throughout.

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# **About the Contributors**

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> This index collects the names of individuals, works (comics, books, and works of art in general, but not single stories), magazines and newspapers, publishers, collectives, festivals, and characters. Only when it seemed necessary, a parenthetical remark is added to avoid ambiguity. For Italian works, the title is given in Italian.

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